

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

Claims 1-10 (Canceled).

11. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for accessing a semi-structured database in accordance with an input request for information, wherein the semi-structured database comprises a plurality of items, each item comprising one or more fields having a plurality of characters therein, at least one of the fields being a free text field, the apparatus comprising:

means for accessing a data store comprising a plurality of index entries, entries each index entry representing a concordance between an entry in a field of an item in the semi-structured database and that [[an]] item in the semi-structured database;

input means for receiving a request for information, the request comprising a natural language phrase;

a parser for parsing the received request to determine components of the request;

a slot filler for generating a slot-and-filler request having a plurality of slots, each slot corresponding to a group of index entries in said data store, the slot-filler being arranged to identify, one or more object components representing an object of the received request from the parsed request, wherein each slot corresponds to a group of

~~index entries and wherein the slot filler is arranged to allocate at least one object component to a respective slot of a slot-and-filler request; with a plurality of slots; and~~

a query constructor for accessing the data store, wherein the query constructor is arranged to compare the or each allocated object component in the slot-and-filler request with ~~index entries within a group~~ of index entries in said data store corresponding to the slot of the allocated component, ~~component~~ so as to identify an index entry corresponding thereto, and to use the identified index entry to identify a corresponding ~~[[an]]~~ item in the semi-structured database.

12. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 11, further including:

an index generator comprising a processor arranged, in respect of each item in the semi-structured database, to analyze each field in accordance with a predetermined criterion so as to identify an entry within said field, and to generate at least one index entry representing a concordance between an identified entry and the item corresponding to the identified entry, and store the generated index entry in the data store;

wherein for each of a plurality of predetermined formats, the processor is arranged to search said free text field to identify a sequence of characters having a format corresponding to the predetermined format, said identified sequence of characters being deemed to constitute an identified entry.

13. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 12, wherein for the

free text field, the processor is arranged to define any data not identified as an entry as a free text entry.

14. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 13, wherein the free text entry comprises at least one free text word defined by a sequence of alphanumeric characters, the processor being arranged to identify at least one selected free text word for a field by comparing the free text entry with at least one selection criterion defining one or more predetermined characteristics of a selected free text word.

15. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 11, wherein the items within the semi-structured database are further arranged in groups of items, each group being located in a heading field and being identified by at least one heading entry, wherein the processor is arranged to identify a heading entry by comparing each heading field with each of a plurality of selection criteria defining one or more predetermined characteristics of a respective heading entry, and is arranged to generate index entries representing a concordance between such heading entries and the group of items in the heading field.

16. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 11, wherein the slot filler is arranged to identify verb components forming a verb or verb group in the parsed request and to allocate any such identified verb components to a slot in accordance with a predetermined mapping between verb components and slots.

17. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 16, wherein the slot filler is arranged to identify any subject components in accordance with the position of the verb or verb group within the request and to allocate any such identified subject components to a slot in accordance with a predetermined mapping between subject components and slots.

18. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 16, wherein, in the absence of identifying verb components, the slot filler is arranged to deem any components to be object components.

19. (Previously Presented) Apparatus according to claim 11, wherein the data store is part of the apparatus.